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**Enhancing Student Learning in Large Undergraduate Classes
by Using Audio-visual Case Studies**

Rumintha Wickramasekara

School of AMPR, Queensland University of Technology

2 George St GPO Box 2434

Brisbane, Queensland 4001 Australia

Email: r.wickrama@qut.edu.au

Geoff Bamberry

School of Commerce, Charles Sturt University

Locked Bag 588

Wagga Wagga NSW 2678 Australia

Email: gbamberry@csu.edu.au

Dipu Sabastian

School of AMPR

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ABSTRACT

Critical skills such as identifying and appreciating issues that confront firms engaging in international business, and the ability to undertake creative decision-making, are considered fundamental to the study of International Business. It has been argued that using audio-visual case studies can help develop such skills. However, this is difficult due to a lack of Australian case studies. This paper reviews the literature outlining the advantages believed to result from the use of audio-visual case studies, describes a project implemented in a large cohort of students studying International Business, reports on a pilot evaluation of the project, and outlines the findings and conclusions of the survey.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Case studies, International Business studies

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing expectation from government, employer groups and society that university graduates be work ready (Higher Education Academy, 2006). Current research suggests that employers in the globalised marketplace require business graduates who possess a range of skills, knowledge and attributes, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable in a range of contexts, and are acquired as a result of completing any undergraduate degree.

The focus is typically on graduate attributes that are appropriate to the professional areas associated with specific courses, but it also includes general scholarship, research and problem-solving, written and oral communication, critical thinking, as well as personal attributes such as team work and ethical behaviour (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). In the International Business discipline, there is a need to develop skills related to business environments (Basadur & Hausdorf, 1996), particularly the ability to identify and appreciate issues that confront firms engaging in creative decision-making within the IB context.

Skill development

Developing key skills is especially challenging in large classes with hundreds of undergraduate students and a heterogeneous student body, exacerbated by the fact that the majority of full-time undergraduate students are recent secondary school leavers with little work or life experience. The existence of large classes tends to result in an over-reliance on teaching through lectures to large numbers of students, with much of the assessment based on multiple choice questions. While cost effective, these approaches can result in the 'dumbing down' of instruction, limiting desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking, problem-solving and the integration of theory and practice (Biggs, 1993; Ertmer & Dillon, 1998)

Many universities have recognised the value of 'real-world' learning based on experiential and problem-centred approaches. Initiatives such as work- integrated learning, work placements, cooperative education programs and practicums, are useful ways of developing work-related skills. However, they are extremely labour-intensive to organise for large groups of students, and are typically used in capstone courses for smaller groups of advanced students. Alternative, less labour-intensive approaches are needed for large groups of first-year students.

It has been argued that in the early years of the undergraduate curriculum, there should be a focus on the development of generic skills in a systematic manner (Sebastian & Zimitat, 2007). This involves using teaching and learning interventions that allow students to engage in the learning process in a more meaningful way. It is widely recognised that the development of generic skills requires learning settings that focus on processes and student-centred activities, rather than on the subject content in isolation (Biggs, 1999; Candy et al, 1994; Ramsden, 1992). Laurillard (1993) comments that activities such as dialogue, feedback, reflection and task-oriented actions need to be used, while Shepard (1989) argues that lecturers should avoid spoon-feeding students, providing opportunities for them to gain skills in thinking, reasoning, solving real problems and comprehending complex tasks.

Case Studies

Case studies are one form of experiential learning that has been used widely in business education due to their ability to link real world situations with theory. An advantage of case studies is that they allow learners to play an active role in the knowledge acquisition process (Yeo, 2005). It can be argued that they have a positive impact on student learning by:

- emphasising learning over teaching (Gibbs, 1992; Kember, 2000),
- engaging students creatively as active participants in the learning process (Driver, 2001).
- being student-centered rather than teacher-centered (Biggs, 1999; Ertner & Dillon, 1998),
- promoting the development of students' higher order thinking skills (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004),
- being meaningful and/or interesting to students (Dechef, 2005; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2004) and
- being practical and useful (Furco, 2005; McDade, 1995),
- improving the understanding of how successful firms operate in the global environment (Honig, 2004),
- being problem based (Yeo, 2005), and
- linking theory with practice (Biggs, 1993; Higher Education Academy, 2006).

However, the disadvantage of the traditional written cases has been the second-hand reporting of events (Dechef, 2005). This limitation can be overcome by presenting the first-hand experiences of business leaders in an audio-visual format. Unfortunately, 'off the shelf' audio-visual case studies often do not align well with the goals and objectives of courses. As highlighted by Biggs (1996), it is imperative to ensure alignment between objectives,

teaching and learning activities, and the assessment tasks. In addition, case questions are rarely formulated to encompass or capture Bloom's higher-order cognitive domains. Further, there is a dearth of case study material within the Australian context. Most IB textbooks with pedagogically-enhanced features such as case studies are published in the United States. This results in a limited coverage of some of the issues specific to Australian firms. In contrast, the majority of Australian companies tend to be small to medium- sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in a small domestic market. This limitation was identified by the DEST-funded report *Australian Business Education Study: Enhancing the quality of Australian business education* (2002, xxix) in its Recommendation 10:

Develop course content and support materials to be more relevant to the Australian context, but also global in perspective [and specifically, to engage in the] development of case study material for business education that recognises our international markets and the Australian context.

Hence, there is a growing need to develop appropriate case study material to support IB students within Australian institutions. In addition, leading educationalist such as Biggs (1993) and Ramsden (2003) have highlighted that a student's level of knowledge is largely influenced by the type of learning approach he or she experiences. Students who experience a deep approach to learning with a high level of engagement, will have an interest in the task and will better understand ideas and meanings (Biggs, 1993; Ramsden, 2003). As a result, students experiencing this approach tend to use strategies that make the task coherent with their own experience, integrating information into their existing awareness (see 'Academic Susan' in Figure 1). For 'non-academic Robert' (in Figure 1) the teaching and learning method is 'critical' in developing high-level engagement (Biggs in Buckridge and Guest, 2007). However, irrespective of their learning orientation both students will benefit from active learning and teaching methods (Kember, 1998).

FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE

THE PROJECT

Faced with enrolments of nearly 1000 students per session in an introductory International Business course at an Australian university, the majority being recent school leavers with limited work and life experience, and mindful of

the issues discussed above, we decided to embark on a strategy of using audio-visual case studies to capture the interest of students and take advantage of the benefits of this approach to teaching outlined in the literature. In particular, it was decided to focus on case studies on Australian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to highlight key issues within the IB curriculum.

The key question that emerged was: *Can the introduction of an experiential learning approach based on analysing audio-visual case studies transform an IB subject into a learning environment where:*

- *students enjoy their studies ,*
- *the audio-visual cases add credibility to the themes raised in the lectures and tutorials, as well as in the texts and references, in relation to Australian SMEs,*
- *learning is enhanced by being student-centered rather than being teacher-centered, and*
- *students are encouraged to think creatively in formulating solutions to complex IB problems and issues faced by Australian companies?*

Teaching within the subject comprises three hours of formal tuition each week, one two-hour lecture and one one-hour workshop. At the University's central city campus, lectures generally cater for 300-400 students, while the workshops include 20-25 students in each group. The students attend the lecture one week and the material presented forms the basis of the workshop activity in the following week. A similar approach is used at a subsidiary campus where enrolments are typically about 80 to 160 per session. The subject is taught over a thirteen week period. Students viewed the audio-visual cases during their lectures, and subsequently prepared solutions in response to the questions that were posed after each case study. Responses were then discussed in the workshop sessions.

In order to ensure that the cases encouraged students to think creatively in formulating solutions to complex IB environments faced by Australian SMEs, care was taken to ensure a close alignment between the issues covered in the audio-visual cases and those included in the course content and objectives. Preliminary interviews were held with the owners/CEOs of the SMEs selected to identify relevant issues, and these provided the basis for the questions later put to the key respondents for discussion. The format adopted for the case studies was a documentary style similar to that used in television interviews where the interviewer posing the questions is not seen or heard, the key respondent providing a narrative about the nature of the organisation and discussing the relevant

topics. While the cases were selected from a range of industry types, there was a common theme in that the content related to the key issues covered in an introductory course in International Business. For example some of the topics covered included the following:

- factors aiding and inhibiting export market development
- ethical business practices
- use of the internet in internationalisation

An example of a case study produced is that of 'Lazybones,' a small fashion clothing company based at Byron Bay, manufacturing clothing in Bali for the Australian and overseas market. Figure 2 outlines some of the issues raised in the case study, and lists two of the questions students were asked to discuss in their workshop sessions. Other firms that were the subject of audio-visual case studies included Sirromet Wines, Wotif.com and InForm.

FIGURE 2 GOES ABOUT HERE

Fortunately, the University has a specialised centre for the production of audio-visual material staffed by professionals with high levels of expertise in the area. The project was able to draw upon this expertise for advice, planning and implementation of the project. Because of the 'in-house' facility, it was possible to produce the custom-made audio-visual case studies at a cost well below normal commercial rates for similar productions.

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

In order to determine if the desired improvements to the learning and teaching environment were achieved by the introduction of audio-visual case studies, a questionnaire was developed after undertaking item analysis of the existing literature to ensure construct validity (Driver 2001; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2004). The questionnaire sought to gauge students' perceptions of benefits of using audio-visual case studies in International Business. Analysis of the items was undertaken using SPSS to gauge student mean ratings, where scores of greater than 3 indicate positive outcomes. In addition, other unsolicited feedback based on student evaluations was used to ensure some triangulation. This approach is advantageous in terms of providing greater depth of understanding (Kember, 2000).

Rather than attempt to survey the whole population, it was decided to limit the initial evaluation to a pilot survey, and respondents were therefore limited to half the students based on one of the smaller campuses (N=80). While this

decreased the number of potential respondents, it had the advantage of providing some experimental control, as the students were a relatively homogeneous group comprising domestic students who were studying both full-time and part-time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In total, 36 valid questionnaires were returned, a response rate of approximately 45 percent. The respondents comprised an even number of males and females. There were no Indigenous or International students in the sample. In terms of age, the youngest respondent was 18 years old and the eldest respondent was 54 years old, with the average age being 24. In terms of employment, 19 students (52.8 percent) were employed full-time. Eighty percent of the students were enrolled in a major other than International Business.

The respondents were requested to indicate their opinions on the use of audio-visual case studies within the course. These items are listed in Table 1 in the order of the percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statements. Eighty six percent of the students claimed the audio-visual case studies improved their understanding of how successful firms operate in the global environment, a key focus of the subject.

The results also substantiate the advantage of audio-visual case studies over traditional written cases in enabling "first hand reporting of real world business challenges," as 82 percent of respondents attested to this fact. It was noteworthy that 62 percent claimed that the audio-visual case studies helped them to "think more deeply about a topic rather than trying to remember what was said about the topic," thus assisting the respondents to develop critical thinking skills. Forty-four percent of students were encouraged to learn more about the topic. This is a very pleasing result, given that only 20 percent of the students were planning to major in IB.

TABLE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE

For the open-ended question, "Are there any other comments you wish to make regarding the use of audio-visual cases?" there was a surprising lack of negative comments. In fact, some students were keen to see greater use of

the approach: "Great idea. I personally think they should be used more often," and "More should be used to get a clearer idea on current global business."

There was also unsolicited feedback suggesting that a range of positive outcomes had been achieved. For example, in the end-of-semester subject evaluations, students provided feedback about the audio-visual case studies. This can be seen in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3 GOES ABOUT HERE

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Was the introduction of audio-visual case studies successful in achieving enhanced learning and teaching? Both formal and informal feedback suggests that it had a positive impact on students' learning by creating a better understanding of concepts and theories through observation of real-life examples, and that it assisted them in observing the practical workings of international business.

Since the introduction of the audio-visual case studies, a number of observations regarding the general behaviour and performance of students enrolled in this subject have been made. For example, attendance in lectures has increased, the grade point average has increased significantly (from a pass level to a credit level), and the failure rate has decreased. The academic staff involved in teaching the subject have reported increased student participation in class discussions since the introduction of the audio-visual case studies. While some of these observations are quantifiable (attendance, GPA, failure rates etc), others are anecdotal (student participation etc), and it is therefore not possible to attribute all the observed changes to the implementation of the audio-visual case studies. However, as no other major changes have been made to the content and teaching approaches, and the entry levels of students have not changed significantly, we feel confident that the use of the audio-visual case studies has had a beneficial impact.

In general, the findings of the survey, in terms of both solicited and unsolicited feedback, provided evidence to show that the intervention was successful in achieving better learning outcomes for students.

An additional aspect of the feedback obtained from staff, one that was not planned as part of the survey, was that the case studies encouraged greater engagement on the part of the course tutors, who saw the project as a form of staff development. The intervention helped tutors to see students as partners in the learning process, creating greater engagement with them in discussion and problem solving. Overall, the project appears to have confirmed the views in the literature on the benefits of the use of audio-visual case studies, particularly in terms of teaching International Business, in the following ways:

- engaging students creatively as active participants in the learning process (Driver, 2001),
- promoting the development of students' higher order thinking skills (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004; Sebastian & Zimitat, 2007),
- being student-centered rather than teacher-centered (Biggs, 1999; Ertner & Dillon, 1998),
- emphasising learning over teaching (Gibbs, 1992; Kember, 2000),
- being meaningful and interesting to students (Dechef, 2005; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2004) ,
- improving the understanding of how successful firms operate in the global environment (Honig, 2004),
- being problem based (Yeo, 2005),
- being practical and useful (Furco, 2005; McDade, 1995), and
- linking theory with practice (Higher Education Academy, 2006).

However, the small sample size, and the homogeneous nature of the respondents in this study, somewhat limits our ability to generalise extensively on the basis of these findings. In order to verify them, further research will be conducted to include investigation of areas such as:

- the suitability/ difficulty of the audio-visual content,
- the range skills learned,
- the relevance of the skills learned,
- the usefulness of the discussion questions,
- aspects that are lacking in the case studies, and
- the style and format of the case studies.

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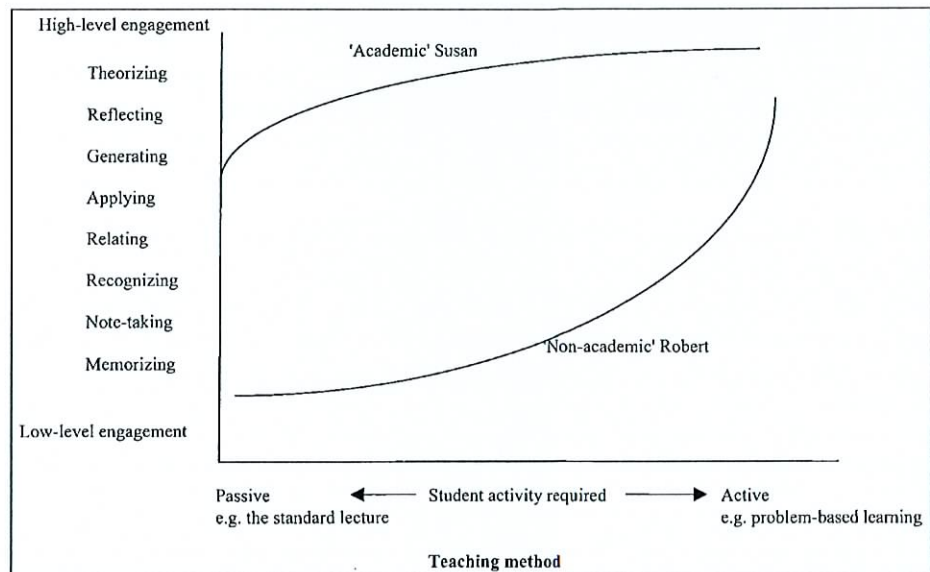
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Figure 1: Student orientation, teaching method and level of engagement



Source: Biggs in Buckridge and Guest (2007)

Figure 2: 'Lazybones,' an example of a case study

This video and the associated material highlights a successful export business based in Byron Bay. The interview with the CEO of the company, Tracey Hocking, explores contemporary issues such as:

- competitive pressures faced by small manufacturing businesses from low-cost producers based in countries such as China,
- overcoming these competitive pressures to become globally competitive,
- key success factors,
- issues involved in expanding production and sales overseas, and
- undertaking business in an ethical manner.

A number of questions were carefully crafted to capture higher-order thinking by using Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. For example, the following questions were formulated to cover 'evaluation' and 'syntheses':

Questions

In relation to *Lazybones*:

Appraise the factors that contributed to the shifting of manufacturing overseas.

Assess the mode of entry used to enter Bali.

Table 1: Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the following statements

	%
Improved my understanding of how successful firms operate in a global environment	86
Made learning more effective by audio-visualising first hand "face-to-face" reporting of examples of real world business challenges	82
Made learning interesting	81
Enhanced my overall learning in this subject	80
Made learning easier by illustrating the link between theory and practice	79
Helped me to develop a better understanding of international business issues	79
Made learning more efficient by reinforcing my understanding of the concepts and issues covered in the lecture.	76
Help me gain 'real world' perspective into how Australian firms operate in the global environment	72
Helped to improve my attention span during the lectures	71
Helped me to understand the challenges faced by Australian small to medium sized enterprises	68
Encouraged me to think more deeply about a topic than just trying to remember what was said about the topic	62
Made learning fun	56
Improved my ability to formulate solutions to problems I audio-visual not previously encountered	53
Improved my problem solving skills by highlighting innovative solutions to real world business problems	50
Encouraged me to want to learn more about the topic	47

Figure 3: Unsolicited feedback on the audio-visual case studies

Student A: "I find the case studies shown in the lecture helpful as it helps me better understand the subject material."

Student B: "the video cases are very interesting and easy to follow."

Student C: "the case studies are great. We should have audio-visual material for all subjects."

Student D: "as a mature age students with a number of years of work experience, I find the audio-visual case studies are more useful in applying theoretical aspects of the course, as I can relate to these more easily."

Student E: "The audio-visual case studies were much more interesting, and I found that I had more motivation to learn. I could also apply my experiences to the discussion questions that followed these case studies."